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Identity in Diaspora Literature:
A Reading of *Mona in the Promised Land*
流散文学中的身份: 解读《梦娜在希望之乡》

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Abstract

Diaspora has become an important research subject in ethnic literature. As one diasporic group, Chinese American writers are playing a great role in the world literature. With gaining more knowledge about their homeland and themselves, they become more aware of their social status and identity. Many of them try to reveal their diasporic values by devoting themselves to writing.

Mona in the Promised Land is written by Gish Jen to describe the life of second-generation Chinese American adolescent. By depicting the conflict and communication between Mona and her families and friends, the novel manifests how a Chinese American adolescent constructs her identity. The thesis further explores the inner-ethnic-group and inter-ethnic-group conflict and generalizes three identity formation stages including early identification, psychosocial moratorium and break-up with mother-culture and return. By analyzing these characters and stages, it mainly intends to point out two ideas from the author about how the diasporic identity should be built and how the image of Chinese American is changing. The ideas involve non-essentialism, fluidity of identity and rising awareness of self-identity. Gish Jen insists on fluid identity while at the same time criticizing one's denying his/her biological merits. She also praises the increasing awareness of one's identity among the adolescent Chinese Americans.

Key word: identity formation; diaspora; Chinese American; non-essentialism; psychosocial moratorium

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摘要

流散研究已经成为英美族裔文学中的一个研究重点。作为流散文学的一员，华裔美国作家在世界文学领域中正起着举足轻重的作用。随着他们对祖国和自身认识的不断强化，他们对于自己的社会地位和身份的意识也不断加强。许多人都想通过写作来表达自己的对于流散人群以及现状的一些感悟。

《梦娜在希望之乡》就是任碧莲创作的关于美国第二代华人移民的成长故事。小说通过描写梦娜与家人以及朋友的各种冲突和沟通，来展示一个华裔美国青少年如何在成长中构建自己的身份。本文还深入探讨了华裔内部矛盾以及种族间矛盾，概括了个人身份构建的三个阶段，分别是早期的认同阶段，中期的社会心理延缓，以及后期的分裂与回归。通过分析小说中的人物和三个身份形成的发展阶段，本文着重剖析了作者任碧莲对于流散族裔身份构建和流散华裔美国人的形象变化的两个观点。这些观点涉及了非本质主义，身份的流动性，以及自我身份意识的觉醒。任碧莲在坚持身份流动性的同时又批评了否认自己先天身份的做法。同时，她也肯定了年轻一代的华裔美国青年对于自己身份意识的提高。

关键词：身份构建；流散；华裔美国人；非本质主义；社会心理延缓

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Introduction

Gish Jen is the second generation Chinese American. She grows up in the Jewish community of New York and witnesses various events like immigration, assimilation and occasional tensions between ethnical groups. Raised up in more than two cultures, she finds out the best way to build her identity and tries to present it in her novel.

Mona in the Promised Land is the second book she has ever published after *Typical American*. It mainly continues to tell the story about Changs family and depicts the adolescent life of the second-generation Chinese American girl, Mona. Focused on identity seeking, Mona develops special friendship with Rabbi Horowitz, Barbara, and Seth and so on. By managing these relationships, she gradually constructs values about world and life.

Previously, *Mona in the Promised Land* is often studied as an Initiation Story; however, it is much more than it. Though the protagonist in the novel is an adolescent, at the same time she is a teenager with several identities. The identity as an exile fits her more. Therefore, her identity formation is more complicated and influenced by her multi-identity.

In order to stress that the diasporic sentiment has played an important role on Mona's identity formation, the thesis intends to discuss about the novel from the point of diaspora literature. It tries to explore how diasporic identity can be built through interaction with others, identification, psychosocial moratorium, and break-up with mother-culture. It generalizes the points of view the author intends to express through the novel. It also analyzes several important theories related to identity formation like non-essentialism, Confucianism and mother-daughter relationship. The whole thesis has been divided into three parts:

Chapter One begins with the origin and development of diaspora literature, from which we can have a better understanding about Gish's novel. It explores the

characteristics of diaspora literature by referring to famous diasporic writers and novels. Meanwhile, it gives a brief introduction about Chinese American literature, Gish Jen and her second novel. By studying some details and information about the author, it helps to explain several important plots in the novel.

Chapter Two mainly discusses about how diasporic identity forms. First by studying the differences between Confucianism and Christianity and Erikson's theory about adolescent growth, it concludes the conflicts and reasons for diasporic ones' identity formation. Then it analyzes three stages of identity formation including identification, psychosocial moratorium, and break-up. Moreover, it draws a comparison between the identity formation of the first generation Chinese American and the second. Finally, it sums up two points of view the author intends to emphasize which are non-essentialism and rising identity awareness.

Chapter Three analyzes five important characters in the novel closely related to protagonist and her identity formation. By dividing these five people into two parts, it discusses about two possible influences on Mona's identity formation. The first part is Chinese-oriented influence which comes from Helen and Callie while the second part is the free will advocators like Rabbi Horowitz, Alfred and Seth. By studying their relationship and communication with Mona, it analyzes how they have impacted her values and thoughts.

Chapter One Diaspora Literature and *Mona in the Promised Land*

1.1 The Origin and Development of Diaspora

1.1.1 The Definition and Jewish Prototype of Diaspora Literature

The term diaspora is derived from the Greek verb *speiro* (to scatter) and the preposition *dia-* (apart or across). Diaspora involves an idea of a homeland, a place from where the displacement occurs and narratives of harsh journeys undertaken on account of economic compulsions. Basically diaspora is a minority community living in exile. *The Oxford English Dictionary 1989 Edition* (second) traces the etymology of the word “Diaspora” back to its Greek root and to its appearance in the Old Testament (Deut: 28:25): God’s intentions for the people of Israel to be dispersed across the world. *The Longman Dictionary of contemporary English 2003 Edition* (second) offers the explanation: (the Jews living in) the various countries outside ancient Palestine or modern Israel in which Jews are scattered. However, *the 1993 Edition of Shorter Oxford’s* definition of Diaspora can be found. While still insisting on capitalization of the first letter, “Diaspora” now also refers to “anybody of people living outside their traditional homeland”. In history and literature study, more and more researchers insist on the broad sense of “diaspora”. As John Thieme describes:

“Historically, diaspora continued to be mainly used to refer to the large number of Jews living outside Israel, but in recent times it has been applied to the overseas migrant populations of numerous other communities and peoples like the African diaspora, the American diaspora, the South Asian diaspora and the Irish diaspora.”
(Thieme, 2003:77)

Tracing back to the origin of diaspora, we can see that it first appeared in the *Holy Bible*. The story runs like this: according to the Judaism, Canaan (now called Palestine) is the only holy place which God offered to them. The Jews lived there for many generations, and had a prosperous life. However, after hundreds of years, the ancient Babylonians invaded the area and caused the Jewish people to leave their own homeland and wander from place to place.

The diasporic details are described in the *Holy Bible* as follows: the LORD shall cause you to be defeated before your enemies; you will go out one way against them, but you will flee seven ways before them, and you will be an example of terror to all the kingdoms of the earth. (Deut: 28:25) The LORD will smite you with the boils of Egypt and with tumors and with the scab and with the itch, from which you cannot be healed. (Deut: 28:27)

The Jews scatters in the world, and they are faced with the dilemma between their weak power as ethnic group and the strong influence from the nation they are living in. "They are trying to figure out a possible solution to two conflicting principles, which are to exist and prosper in the different nation or race and maintain their Jewish tradition and identity." (Tcherikove, 1999: 346)

How to balance the two principles? According to history, on the one hand, the Jewish elites at that time choose to learn and master the foreign culture, including languages, literature, and philosophy and so on. On the other hand, they distinguish the advantages of each culture, and try to be critical to both of them. They adapt valuable essence from the foreign culture for their own use. They even use some rational ideas in one culture to help promote and balance the emotional factors in the other culture. Among all of the values about the life, patriotism and nationalism are always the main principles guiding their way of living. Therefore, in their mind, a diasporic life will always have a close link with their mother culture, which also develops into a core element of diaspora literature.

Besides an idea of a homeland, a place from where the displacement occurs and narratives of harsh journeys, it also consists of the location of a fluid human

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